

## **PARLIAMENT OF BIRDS – COMMUNICATION BY IAN HARRIS, CLERK OF THE AUSTRALIAN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

I have previously delivered a communication, which evolved into a report, on attempts in Australia to improve the public perception of the Parliament. On this occasion, I would like to outline some of the steps being taken by the Australian national parliament to educate its citizens (including its young citizens) on Australia's parliamentary processes.

### ***University visits***

Over the past three years the Australian House of Representatives has been developing a partnership with tertiary institutions. We believe that it is important for the parliament to connect more effectively with the up and coming talent of our nation and with those who are educating them. So we have established a university lecture program whereby members of the House and senior parliamentary officials visit universities free of charge to provide lectures on the realities of working in today's House of Representatives. The program was trialled with a few universities and proved such a success that it has now been extended to tertiary institutions throughout Australia. Usually the Speaker and I deliver the talks. A small and manageable number of universities is visited annually.

### ***Internships***

The House also participates in an intern scheme, sponsored by the Australian National University. Interns are attached for a short time to the staff of Members and Senators, and are required to produce a research paper during their internship. On occasion, an intern has been attached to my office. We have also commenced a system of employing a small group of university students on a part time basis to do messengerial duties in the Chamber and elsewhere. Our system is based on the very successful Canadian system. So far, one intern has joined the staff of the House, but this is not our principal aim. We draw from a variety of disciplines: science, the arts, forestry etc. Our hope is that Australia's leaders of tomorrow have some understanding of the operation of Australia's parliamentary system.

### ***New technologies***

We have made use of new technologies, such as the Internet and digital television, which present even further opportunities to engage with different sections of the community. The Australian Parliament has a comprehensive web-site providing access to most recent parliamentary material. On this site, 'House News' provides information on new developments in the House to back up the information provided to the media. In addition, recent experience in producing a documentary and CD-ROM on the first 100 years of the House, and the large number of orders received for the two products, show that the Parliament presented in interesting ways can capture the public imagination.

### ***Parliamentary Education Office***

The principal means by which we attempt to reach the young people of Australia is by means of the Parliamentary Education Office (PEO). The PEO is located within the Department of the Senate. The House of Representatives provides financial support for the PEO's operations, and the staff of the House have input to quality control, content of programs etc.

Elected representatives have an input by means of a Presiding Officers Advisory Group, made up of Senators and Members. The group's principal function is to advise the President and the Speaker on the operations of the PEO.

The PEO aims to provide a comprehensive service in parliamentary and citizenship education to schools and to assist senators and members to inform constituents about the parliamentary process. It works in partnership with teachers to assist students (and teachers) to:

- understand the significance of the Australian Parliament;
- understand how the Australian Parliament works; and
- take an active role as citizens in our democracy.

The PEO carries out its national role by:

- conducting active learning programs for student visitors to Parliament House. These one hour programs take place in a dedicated venue—the Education Centre—and engage students in role-plays about parliamentary processes and concepts;
- conducting outreach programs for students and teachers in their own classrooms in schools throughout Australia. These programs show how teachers can use the parliamentary process of decision making as a teaching/ learning strategy in the classroom;
- producing and publishing state curriculum based parliamentary education resources for teachers. Many of the resources are published on the PEO website (<http://www.peo.gov.au/index.html>);
- delivering professional development programs for school teachers, trainee teachers and tertiary and community educators in schools, technical and further education institutions and universities;
- providing fellowships that give opportunities for young professionals including Aboriginal and other community leaders, teachers and journalists to further their knowledge of parliamentary processes;
- conducting a range of special activities and events, including symposiums and Conferences, an annual forum on the subject of the Budget, sessions of the National Youth Science Forum, an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio program for rural youth), the Rotary Adventure in Citizenship, and Talk-back classroom (a program where senior secondary school students interview senior politicians and other community leaders for broadcast on the national ABC youth radio network). Further details are available from the PEO website; and
- maintaining a very useful website.

As would be apparent from this range of activities, the PEO works closely and pro-actively with schools systems, universities and teacher organisations on a number of levels. It seeks to work collaboratively with the relevant professional education networks. The scale of the work is significant and the quality high, and to illustrate this I will refer to three areas:

- services for school groups within parliament;
- a new education resource for primary school students, Cockatoo Island; and
- the PEO's new web site.

## **Services for school groups within parliament**

In recent years, more than 100 000 students have visited our national Parliament House in Canberra each year as part of an organised school group. Based on recent survey data, this represents more than 80% of inter-state student visitors to the national capital.<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive Visitors' Services Section in Parliament House conducts tours, explains and interprets the Parliament and provides written materials.

The PEO provides Education Centre services for almost 80 000 of the visiting students. Included amongst them are about 16 000 students (from 550 schools) who live a long way from the national capital and whose travel to parliament is partly subsidised under a program called the Citizenship Visits Program. The program is administered by the House of Representatives. Expenditure last financial year totalled just over a million dollars.

PEO Education Centre services began with the occupancy of the present Parliament House building in 1988. They have evolved over time, and the current programs now include:

- debating a bill role-play (with a choice of five bills for primary, and eight bills for secondary, although others can be used);
- committee of inquiry role-play (with one topic available for primary, and eight bills for secondary, although others can be used); and
- Question Time role-plays.

Importantly, professional educators are involved in delivering the programs. For most visiting student groups, from all states and territories in Australia, the parliamentary education program is linked directly to primary and secondary social science curricula.

External and internal evaluations of the Education Centre program over the period have demonstrated that the program is achieving its aims of encouraging students to become active and informed citizens. Last year, an external evaluation, indicated a 97 per cent level of satisfaction by school groups participating in PEO programs.<sup>2</sup>

Visiting school groups have the opportunity to meet with their elected representatives during their visits to Parliament House. An automated booking system advises members and senators about bookings for schools visiting from their electorates or States/ Territories, and a refinement to the program will allow for an electronic reminder close to the visit. This enables members and senators, if they wish, to make arrangements to meet with the students. All members of parliament in Australia consider visits to schools as among their most important duties.

### ***Cockatoo Island***

Last year, our Presiding Officers launched Cockatoo Island, an exciting new resource for young school children produced by the PEO.

Cockatoo Island is an imaginary island run by a parliament of Australian birds. Three colourful 'Big Books' introduce students to a diverse and democratic society. Illustrated by central Australian artist Kaye Kessing, they tell the story of how the birds organise life on the

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<sup>1</sup> Discover what it means to be Australian in your National Capital: Size and effects of school excursions to the National Capital, 2002, Centre for Tourism Research, University of Canberra, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

island to be fair and tolerant with opportunities for all and the right to be heard. Birds Australia has enthusiastically supported the project, and provided advice which has ensured that the ornithological details in the teaching notes are accurate.

Teachers' 'In-Flight Guides' are provided with background notes about parliament (and the birds), curriculum outcomes, portfolio pages and role-cards. The stories and the activities that go with them have been trialled in schools over the last three years with great success. PEO staff members are now visiting different regions to introduce the resource to classroom teachers.

The Cockatoo Island package is now being sold throughout the country through the publishing firm Thomson Learning. Under the contract, the project has been undertaken at minimal cost to the Australian Parliament. In the first five months after publication some four hundred schools have purchased the resource, involving an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 students throughout Australia (and royalty return to the Australian Parliament). Its potential for education programs in other parliamentary democracies is already being tested, successfully, in South Africa, using South African birds. Details about how to order the product are available from the PEO website. Information about intellectual property and any adaptation of the concept are available from the author, PEO staffer, Ali Garnett.

Studies of citizenship education have concluded that it is not what we teach in schools but how we run them that determines whether students will emerge as active, participating citizens.<sup>3</sup> The Cockatoo Island resource is a significant addition to the resources available to teachers to encourage their students to develop concepts of democracy. It complements a major curriculum initiative in the late 1990s by the Australian Government entitled 'Discovering Democracy'. The Cockatoo Island project demonstrates that innovative programs are the key to engaging the interest of the young people in the parliament.

### ***Parliamentary Education Office Website***

The PEO website has recently been redeveloped. The site continues to provide comprehensive, accurate and useful information on PEO programs, activities and events and a range of resources for teachers, primary and secondary students and internet resources.

As a new development, the PEO website also now includes an interactive sub-site for upper primary students, called *Kidsview*, which includes a number of features designed to interest children.

Content is arranged across five main themes: Representation, Law-making, Democracy, Parliament House and Parliamentary Artefacts. *Kidsview* includes complementary teaching material for teachers and parents. It links directly with State and Territory social science curricula, assisting teachers, parents and students in achieving curriculum outcomes.

### ***Conclusion***

The Australian national parliament considers the investment in parliamentary education to be both important and necessary to contribute to the task of sustaining our system of parliamentary government. I would be interested to learn of the experience of other legislatures in introducing young people to the operation of their parliaments.

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<sup>3</sup> Then Senate President Margaret Reid *Taking Parliament to the People and Bring People to the Parliament*. Paper presented to 30<sup>th</sup> Conference of Presiding Officers and Clerks, Fiji, 16-24 July 1999, p 11.